

Sunday 23 November – Christ the King

Sermon by Liz Barnes

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk))

In the days when nearly everyone went to church! and most people made their own Christmas pudding, today was known in the Anglican tradition, as 'Stir-up Sunday.' The opening words of the Book of Common Prayer collect for the 'Sunday Next Before Advent' were 'Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded, – and that was the cue for giving the pudding mixture a good stir. The preparations had begun – and today our preparations for Advent begin and Advent in turn is a time of preparation for Christmas.

Jeremiah says, 'The days are coming.'

The days of Advent are coming. In modern times our rituals for Advent have developed. In most homes, especially those with children, there will be the daily ceremonial of opening the appropriate window on the Advent Calendar, but these are not solely focused on children. Having become a keen sewist in recent years I was surprised to see Advent Calendars being advertised full of sewing related items – yes, I did resist! Originally, I suppose, most such calendars had at least a Christian flavour. Now the flavour it appears can be anything! But the idea remains the same – you are counting down the days to Christmas.

And then of course, there are the candles on the Advent Ring. The first of those will be lit next Sunday. This is a counting up rather than a countdown. In a way their intention is the same as with the Advent Calendar – to arouse anticipation. But – partly, no doubt, because it is done in church – there is more to it than that. It is a matter not only of arousing anticipation but also of heightening awareness. There is the symbolism of light itself and the various themes of Advent.

So, the days that are coming – the Advent days – are an exciting and significant time. The important thing is that, though so much of what is done in Advent has a special appeal for children, their impact should not be lost on those of us who are older. It is all too easy for them to simply

become part of 'what is done.' The days that are coming are days to savour, days to use, days for penitence and days for spiritual growth and we should not fail to make good use of them!

Today is a day to stop and take stock before we enter Advent and our reading from St Paul's letter to the Colossians offers us encouragement and wisdom as it proclaims a profound truth: that in Christ, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him, all things on earth and in heaven are reconciled to God. It begins with an exquisite blessing which identifies the source of the Christian's power, namely, Christ. We are not strong in ourselves but only as children of God.

The hymn's Christology then unfolds in three parts, describing him as one who participates in creation, holds all things together, and reconciles all things in heaven and on earth through his death on the cross.

It is a letter that is filled with blessings, testimony, early church doctrine, and a refutation of gnostic heresies. Paul is writing to a congregation he has not met in person and is seeking to set straight the heart of the Christian message to a community of mostly Gentile people.

Then we are offered a beautiful weaving of testimony and doctrine. We hear an echo of Jesus' declaration in the Gospel of John, "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." In this passage Paul asserts that Christ is the one who makes the invisible God visible and then goes on to amplify further the lordship of Christ.

We are then offered a clarifying nugget of wisdom: Christ "is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything."

Have you ever wondered how many church disagreements, mission statements, or personal dilemmas might be resolved by simply asking the question, "Does this allow Christ to have first place?" This is a fabulous invitation to take stock of our personal lives and our common life to see what else might have edged into first place, and to ask that God reorder our lives to suit God's holy purpose.

The energy and passion in this particular piece of writing fits well with the notable celebration of the Reign of Christ for this Sunday in the church calendar.

But that is not all - in our Gospel reading we see very clearly that it is only through Christ, we find belonging, acceptance, and love. Perhaps one of the most profound demonstrations of divine love is Christ's mercy on the cross—a love so deep that, even in His agony, He pleaded for forgiveness on behalf of those who condemned Him and reassured the thief beside Him in His final moments. And as His followers, we are called to be imitators of Christ and to be His light and hope in the world.

The crowd that mocked and condemned Jesus could not fully grasp the gravity of their actions. In much the same way, if we are not careful, we too can fail to recognise the true impact of our words and deeds until God, in His mercy, reveals them to us. Our blind spots—whether born of ignorance, pride, or fear—can prevent us from seeing clearly. That is why we must continually examine our hearts, laying them before God with humility, and seeking the wisdom and discernment of the Holy Spirit in all we do.

On this feast of Christ the King, as we prepare for the season of Advent, our Gospel reading reminds us of the enormity of what God has given to us through the promised Christ-child who died for us on a cross. St Paul reminds us of the bigger picture and the greater narrative - may we be encouraged by Paul's words. And as the prophet Jeremiah said, 'The days are coming,' Indeed they are.

Amen